

**Comhlámh Bewley's debate 4 October 2006**  
**Development and Climate Change: Will growth end poverty or the planet?**  
Speech by Oisín Coghlan, Friends of the Earth

Other speech was by Neil Alldred, Irish Congress of Trade Unions.  
Chair: Clare O'Grady Walshe.

**Three main points:**

1. The threat of runaway climate change is one of the greatest threats to the fight against global poverty.
2. If we try to make poverty history using the current Western model of economic growth it will lead to catastrophic climate change.
3. Only a paradigm shift in our economic thinking can prevent climate chaos, which would exacerbate global poverty and undermine Irish, and Western, prosperity.

**Three concepts to help us grapple with the dilemma:**

*Environmental limits*

That are definite limits to what we can take out of the natural environment and, as in the case of carbon emissions and other climate pollution, definite limits to what we can dump into the natural environment without dramatic negative consequences

*Environmental space*

Within those limits then it is a question of how we distribute and share the available "environmental space" between people across the globe. This is closely associated with the idea of your "ecological footprint".

*Environmental justice*

No less than a decent environment for everyone and no more than a fair share of the world's resources. While environmental injustice occurs within countries in the case of climate change the most obvious injustice is between the developed and developing worlds.

**1. The threat of runaway climate change is one of the greatest threats to the fight against global poverty.**

The rich world has caused climate change but it's the poorest who will be hit first and hardest.

The link between climate change and development revolves around how we produce and use energy. The burning of fossil fuels produces carbon emissions which trap more of the sun's heat in the atmosphere, destabilizing the global climate system. And, of course our energy use is highly correlated to economic growth.

US: the equivalent of 26 power stations running 24/7 to power appliances that are on stand by. Meanwhile:

2 billion people (1/3 world) have no access to electricity

4 billion do not have access to enough energy to meet their basic needs.

Dev world has got rich on the back of a 200 year fossil fuel binge but it's the world's poor who is waking up to the hangover. CC will hit them first and hardest

⇒ Tsunami (+ Maldives)

The same communities that were devastated by the Asian Tsunami are very vulnerable to increased flooding from the more intense storms and rising sea levels that climate change will bring.

Worldwide, 1/3 of population is coastal, much of it in developing countries. By 2025 UN reckons half of all those living in developing countries will be highly vulnerable to floods and storms.

⇒ Africa (droughts and floods) famine  
(drought Kenya, floods in Ethiopia)

UN report (Living with risk) showed that the number of natural disasters tripled from 1973 to 2002 . Red cross report (WDR 2004) showed that deaths per reported disasters are seven times higher low human development countries compared to high human development countries.

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### **UN Millennium Ecosystem Assessment 2005** (1300 scientists, 95 countries)

We are spending Earth's natural capital, putting such strain on the natural functions of Earth that the ability of the planet's ecosystems to sustain future generations can no longer be taken for granted.

60% of the ecosystem services humanity depends on planet earth for (including things like fresh water and fish stocks) are being used unsustainably

The loss of services derived from ecosystems is a significant barrier to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals to reduce poverty, hunger, and disease

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## **2. If we try to make poverty history using the current Western model of economic growth it will lead to catastrophic climate change.**

One of the commonest stats in the climate debate is the US has 4% of the world's population but it uses 25% of the world's resources and produces 25% of the world's climate pollution. (Ireland not so far behind per capita)

But the underlying assumption of much development theory and practice is that more and more of the populations of China, India, Brazil, South Africa will escape poverty and, using the same western model of economic growth, live the same lifestyles as Europeans and Americans.

The threat of runaway climate change, and the reality of the approaching historical peak and decline in oil production, makes that unthinkable and impossible. Our fossil-fuel based, car-centred, throwaway economy is simply not replicable, nevermind sustainable, on a global scale.

Chinese consumption of grain and meat, coal, and steel has already overtaken that of the United States in absolute terms. Americans still consume more oil than the Chinese. But what if the Chinese eventually used as much per person as the US does now.

On current trends this will happen in 2031. By then:

- China would consume 80% of current world meat production
- More than the total current world production of coal. Every week to ten days a new coal fired power plant opens in China. Coal of course is the most carbon intensive (i.e. climate polluting) way of generating electricity. Except for peat of course, but sure who would use peat to generate electricity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?
- 99 millions barrels of oil per day, while current production is 80 millions barrels of oil a day. (We have used the 1<sup>st</sup> trillion barrels of oil in about 150 years, we will use the 2<sup>nd</sup> in about 30 years and there isn't a third))
- 1.1bn cars, while the current world total is 800 million.

And let's remember that by 2030 the population of India will have overtaken that of China.

(China stats are from Lester Brown, 1996, founder and president of the Earth Policy Institute, *Plan B 2.0: Rescuing a Planet Under Stress and a Civilisation in Trouble.*)

## **3. Only a paradigm shift in our economic thinking can prevent climate chaos, which would exacerbate global poverty and undermine Irish, and Western, prosperity.**

The first two points can be captured by the following fact: If everyone in the world lived like the Irish we would need the resources of three planet Earths. Of course, we have just one earth. And if it is to be a just one, then we are going to have to change our consumption patterns to leave a fair share of the available env space for the people in

Africa, LA, Asia to use while they lift themselves out of poverty. And help them to do so using less energy and producing less pollution than we did.

Ireland issued a White Paper on overseas aid two weeks ago. It promises that Ireland will reach the UN target for overseas aid by 2012, making us the fifth or sixth most generous aid donor in the world per capita.

But we are already the fifth most climate polluting country in the world per capita. And by 2012 the government reckons we will have overshot our Kyoto target for limiting the rise in our climate pollution by 100%.

How coherent is it for the government to plan to spend 1.5 bn euro of taxpayers money on overseas aid if our climate pollution continues to rise, undermining the prospects of those who receive our aid lifting themselves out of poverty.

So, the struggle for global social and environmental justice begins at home.

20 years ago aid agencies and solidarity campaigners began to campaign to cancel the odious debt which profiteering Western financial institutions had lent to Third World governments and forcing them to cut health and education spending to keep up their repayments.

10 years ago aid agencies and solidarity campaigners (including ICTU) began to campaign to rewrite the world trade rules which allowed rich countries protect everything from their farmers to their pharmaceutical companies while forcing poor countries to open their markets to unfair competition.

Challenging economic practices here in Ireland, such as agricultural subsidies, did not come easily to all Irish aid agencies, whose public image was built on uncontroversial notions of helping the poor in Africa. But they did it and the 20,000 people on the streets for the last year's MPH march, and the Gov's new aid plans, are testimony to their power to mobilize and influence public and political opinion.

Now people like me are calling on aid agencies and solidarity campaigners (including ICTU) to begin campaigning to ensure Ireland does its fair share to prevent climate chaos. And that means challenging our wasteful and carefree, not to say reckless, production and consumption patterns.

The response so far has been slow in Ireland, especially compared to the UK where the Stop Climate Chaos coalition last year combined the forces of the likes of Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace with the likes of Oxfam and Christian Aid and the Women's Institute. Within 6 months the directors of Stop Climate Chaos were sitting down with Tony Blair, Gordon Brown, Margaret Becket and Hilary Benn in the same room at the same time to discuss UK climate change policy

Here the government is refusing even to allow environmental NGOs into the social partnership process. Perhaps ICTU could help us out with that one.

And by way of a further challenge to my co-speaker from ICTU there are two examples of ICTU policy stances that seem to us to be short-term and short-sighted.

⇒ Carbon tax

The carbon tax was planned as the main policy instrument the government was going to use to reduce emissions domestically. In 2004 David Begg admitted that in advance of the 2002 budget he asked the government to delay the introduction of a carbon tax, which they did. The planned tax was then abandoned later in 2004. If the tax had been introduced as planned in 2002 or in 1998 when it was first proposed by government consultants we would have already become a lot more energy efficient and our household budgets and our businesses would be a lot less affected now by rising energy costs.

⇒ Energy price - 20 Sept 2006

ICTU Asked the energy regulator to rethink the rise in electricity prices as oil prices were falling back from their historic highs over the summer. Many energy experts, nevermind environmentalists, will tell you that energy prices are too low, not too high, because only when they are high enough will it provide the driver we need to make the leap to a post-fossil fuel, post carbon economy and society.

The bottom line is that the climate crisis and oil peak mean change is coming whether we welcome it or not. Our choice, in Ireland, is what kind of change and whether we manage it ourselves by making the shift to sustainability in a planned step-by-step way, starting now, or whether we wait and let change happen to us by way of shocks, disruption and upheaval down the line. Our decision will also reflect whether our solidarity with the poorest on the planet is “a fair weather friendship” or one that survives testing times.

Almost half a century ago the Whitaker report sparked a paradigm shift in public policy from inward-looking economic self-sufficiency to outward-looking economic internationalism. Twenty years ago a new model of social partnership generated the collective commitment required to pull Ireland out of an economic malaise. Nothing less than another paradigm shift will do now. We need another sustained period of political leadership, innovative public policy and social partnership if we are to rise to the challenge ahead in a way that improves the quality of life for all, both at home and abroad.